

## The Right Fit: How Tom Blumenauer is Leading Cortland Football's Next Chapter

By Leah Masi

From his first meeting with SUNY Cortland Football last February, Tom Blumenauer had Team CXX convinced he was one of them. He made a statement no one would forget.

“He made it known that he is a Red Dragon for life now by smashing and burning his Ithaca helmet from when he played,” senior captain Jayden Lont said. “That got the team fired up.”

He wasn't just introducing himself as their new head coach. He was setting the tone for a new era rooted in accountability, unity, and Red Dragon pride.

His message was clear: Cortland football wasn't just about winning games. It was about building a culture that players could carry with them long after their final snap.

“We do believe that the Cortland experience is not a four-year experience. It's a lifelong experience, a lifelong commitment,” SUNY Cortland Athletic Director Mike Urtz said.

### **Building a Red Dragon Culture**

Urtz, a former Cortland student-athlete who has been part of the community for more than 30 years, said that when he took over the athletics department, he wanted to build on the strong culture and reputation he'd always known at Cortland.

### **One team. One family.**

That's the brand Urtz has cultivated to unite Cortland athletics under a single vision. And when Blumenauer came into the picture, Urtz knew he'd fit right in.

“I'm not sure what he thought he was going to get into,” Urtz said. “Obviously, he knew our football team was competitive, but I think he quickly got a sense of pride in the building and camaraderie among our staff.”

Urtz said Blumenauer has made a strong impression across Cortland athletics, not only with his players, but also among other coaches.

“I think he's doing an outstanding job, and I know the players are really excited about him,” Urtz said. “Everyone is really supportive of him, and he's made a great impression thus far.”

## **The Other Sideline**

As Cortland approaches the biggest little game in the nation, the Cortaca Jug, the team has kept rivalry talk to a minimum.

“We’re trying to keep that on the back burner,” Urtz said. “But inside, I’m sure he’s really excited about it.”

For Blumenauer, a former Ithaca College player, the game holds special meaning.

“Once the team gets to Cortaca week, they can look at him [Blumenauer] and really understand what he’s saying because he did it,” Urtz said. “Yeah, he was on the other side, but he was a football player in this game, so he can really appreciate what the players are going to be going through.”

Blumenauer said his connection to both programs gives him a unique appreciation for the rivalry.

“To be on the other side of it, I’m really happy about that,” he said. “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for my amazing experiences over at Ithaca and the mentors I had, but I’m so thrilled to be here representing Cortland.”

## **Stepping Into Big Shoes**

When deciding who would be the next person to lead Cortland Football, Urtz said he wanted someone experienced, personable, and steady under pressure.

Former head coach Curt Fitzpatrick left behind a decorated legacy — a national championship in 2023 and four straight Empire 8 titles — before accepting a head coaching position at Division I Colgate University.

“He poured his heart and soul into this program,” Blumenauer said. “He’s a busy man, but I know if I wanted to pick his brain, he would be so receptive to it. In spots, he’s been great and so helpful.”

Even after Fitzpatrick’s departure, Blumenauer said his investment in the program remains evident.

“Fitzpatrick cares deeply about this program, and that hasn’t changed one bit,” Blumenauer said.

Replacing a championship-winning coach was no small task, but Urtz said Blumenauer had the right mindset from day one.

“I felt Tom had the skill set to handle adversity and get us to our new level,” Urtz said. “Based on what I’m seeing, what he exuded in his interview process is coming out strong now.”

With years of Division III experience, including leading Franklin & Marshall to postseason success and helping Williams College to a perfect 9-0 season, Blumenauer brought both credibility and confidence to the job.

### **New Blood, Same Heart**

The challenge ahead wasn’t just about filling Fitzpatrick’s shoes, it was also about rebuilding the staff and roster.

When Blumenauer arrived, Cortland’s entire coaching staff had turned over.

“He did a phenomenal job in that,” Urtz said. “So much so that when they got into spring ball, the players were really impressed with the new blood.”

Lont said the spring brought major adjustments, but Blumenauer’s leadership quickly won the team over.

“It was obviously weird in the spring, adjusting to the new coaching staff,” Lont said. “But once you started to know Coach Blu, you realize how much of a great guy he is.”

More than 35 seniors had graduated, leaving gaps on the field and in leadership. But Urtz said that it also created opportunities for younger players and new coaches to grow.

“They’re great football players, but nobody knows their names,” Urtz said. “Watching them and the coaches develop through the season has been a lot of fun.”

Blumenauer said the team’s growth and togetherness have become defining traits.

“I believe we’re getting better every day and becoming a more tight-knit group that takes pride in playing hard,” Blumenauer said. “We talk about the togetherness piece a lot. I think we’re in a great place, and it’s only going to get better.”

### **Leadership and Alignment**

Blumenauer credits his early success to strong communication with his players, especially his captains, who have helped guide the team through the transition.

“They’re selfless leaders who set the tone with their actions and their words,” Blumenauer said.

Lont, who's been with the program for four years, said playing under both Fitzpatrick and Blumenauer has been a privilege. After suffering an injury that sidelined him for the season, he took on a different kind of leadership role and collaborated with the coaching staff.

"That different lens has made me see things from a new point of view," Lont said. "I've watched our team build each and every week, and Coach Blu is a big part of that."

Blumenauer said he's been intentional about preserving Fitzpatrick's foundation while also shaping his own vision.

"I'd be crazy to come in and change everything just for my own ego," Blumenauer said.

That humility and balance are what made Urtz confident in his hire.

"It's about the program," Urtz said. "He wants to help these young men be better versions of themselves, be great football players, try to win, and have fun doing it."

### **Looking Ahead**

Urtz said Blumenauer's impact on the program is just beginning.

"I think his future is very bright here," Urtz said. "He's going to put his mark on this program."

For Blumenauer, that future starts with gratitude.

"It is the special place that I thought it was," Blumenauer said. "Every day I feel incredibly blessed and fortunate to be the new football coach here."

He praised his players' commitment and resilience throughout the transition.

"They made a decision regardless of who the new head coach would be," Blumenauer said. "They were going to stick together, press forward, and continue to have great habits."

Lont said the team has embraced adversity and grown closer through it all.

"The team has been through a lot from the jump," Lont said. "Facing adversity, switching coaching staff, which we have embraced."

That bond, Blumenauer said, defines what it means to wear the Cortland uniform.

"They know it's a place with great tradition and with that comes great responsibility," he said. "They're a joy to coach because they're receptive and work really, really hard."

And through it all, Blumenauer remains grounded in the culture he now represents.

“There won’t be a single day that goes by where I take this responsibility lightly,” Blumenauer said.